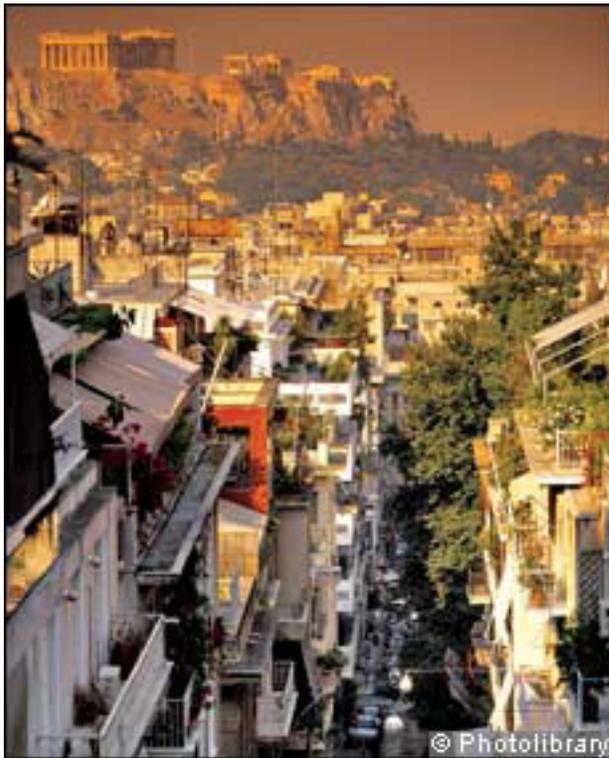


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Acropolis

now

By Kerin Hope



The Kolonaki area of Athens

Lights blaze after dark in the glass-and-concrete galleries of the new museum at the foot of the Acropolis hill as curators work overtime to prepare for its long-awaited opening on June 20.

Architect Bernard Tschumi's pared-down rectangular block, with a top-floor space for the Parthenon frieze that mirrors the dimensions and orientation of the famous classical temple, is already an Athens landmark. About 1m tourists are

expected to pass through its doors every year but the Swiss-born Tschumi and his Greek associate Michael Photiadis are keen for the new Acropolis museum to attract local residents too. Along with an unparalleled collection of ancient sculpture, it offers cafés with a spectacular view, a bookshop, an auditorium and space for temporary exhibitions. Yet the building divides Athenians. Many people are shocked by the contrast its gleaming bulk makes with the austere neo-classical mansions along neighbouring Dionysiou Areopagitou street. On the other hand, the museum's presence, along with a pedestrian walkway curving around the base of the rocky hill, is accelerating the gentrification of rundown city neighbourhoods to the west and north.

Katerina Samaropoulou, an Athens estate agent who specialises in properties with a view of the Acropolis, says prices in the historic centre have risen 40 per cent in the past four years. "They've flattened this year but haven't come down," she says.

The buyers are mostly Greeks who have lived abroad and a few foreigners who like the idea of living near one of Europe's great architectural monuments.

Strict planning regulations limit buildings in the historic centre to three or four stories, rising to seven or eight in the rest of the capital. At the same time, the pollution haze that used to blanket central Athens in still weather has gone, thanks to the arrival of natural gas for heating and better public transport. As a result, the 2,500-year-old Acropolis temples – the Parthenon and two smaller relics – are clearly visible from a distance amid a landscape of sprawling white concrete blocks.

"Proximity certainly pushes up prices. But there's no perfect Acropolis view. It's a matter of individual choice,"

Samaropoulou says.

On Dionysiou Areopagitou, traditionally the home of wealthy

lovers of antiquity, the columns of the Parthenon's south side loom above marble balconies, close enough to spot the scars made by cannon-balls fired in a 17th-century Venetian siege. But only part of the temple is on display and many think it is the neighbourhoods slightly further away that offer better perspective.



The Plaka district

Renee Pappas, a New York public relations consultant, bought a first-floor, 80 sq m flat in the Plaka district 15 years ago opposite the Agora, the city's ancient marketplace. Her view includes a clump of pines across the street, leading up to a jumble of columns etched against the skyline on the north side of the hill.

“It was an unfashionable street at the time – there were junk shops and hookers at night – but I wanted an unobstructed view of the ruins, not just the temples but the Agora, where so much politics and philosophy happened,” she says. “With the trees and the lighting at night, it's magic.”

In Thission, a lively residential district west of the Acropolis, former Wall Street-er Christos Kavathas has meanwhile

completed an ambitious seven-year project to build a modern house on a site squeezed between two neo-classical buildings. The project required patience; it took several years to obtain permits from planning authorities and the Greek state archaeological service and there were delays when a section of Roman wall, painted with a delicate plant design – a feature he was legally required to preserve and display – was unearthed while digging foundations.

But Kavathas has been rewarded with a classic view. From his roof-top deck, planted with olive trees, citrus and a miniature herb garden, he sees the Propylaea, the monumental gateway to the Acropolis framing the Parthenon's west front and the small temple of Nike, shrouded in scaffolding.

“Friends tried to discourage me from buying because of the risk of finding really valuable antiquities, [which] would have meant compulsory expropriation and no house. [But] I was lucky,” Kavathas says.

Demand for high-end properties around the Acropolis has slowed but not disappeared since the economic crisis, according to Stathis Triphyllis, an Athens-based entrepreneur who bought and restored a four-storey neo-classical mansion in Thission, using Italian craftsmen to repair its elaborate frescoes. Built by an early 20th-century architect as his family home, the house has a formal roof garden with a broad marble balustrade setting off a three-quarter view of the Parthenon against a hazy backdrop of mountains – the one that would have greeted travellers in antiquity as they made their way to Athens from the port of Piraeus. The asking price is €10m.

“That architect picked a site that to my mind is the best possible Acropolis view,” Triphyllis says. His office, in a renovated factory building in Kerameikos, a former industrial area near the ancient potters' quarter of Athens, has a similar outlook but from further away.

Other buyers prefer to see the Acropolis from the east, a vista that silhouettes the temples against the sunset or, on a clear day, against the blue of the Saronic Gulf. And there are several large-scale renovation and new-build projects to suit them.

Leading Athens architectural firm ISV is, for example, building a luxury apartment block in the Kallimarmaro district, 2km southeast of the historic centre, with panoramic views of the Acropolis and the Saronic from the upper floors and crowned by a 230 sq metre penthouse with a roof-top swimming pool, priced at €1.5m, while two Cypriot investors, Christos Joannou and Milto Kambourides, are transforming the former headquarters of the late urban planner Constantine Doxiadis – modernist buildings cut into Lykavettos hill – into 25 luxury apartments, six of which will have floor-to-ceiling views of the Acropolis on one side and the green bulk of Lykavettos on the other.

“It’s a challenge,” says Nikolas Travasaros, the Athens- and London-based architect working on the latter project. “We have to turn a purpose-built modular office block into high-end apartments and we also have to preserve a modern architectural monument.”

The development will also incorporate a communal roof-top garden, a children’s playspace, a movie theatre and a spa and fitness centre and the apartment prices are expected to reach €15,000 per sq metre, making them among the most expensive in Greece.

Yet Acropolis views are also accessible at much lower costs. Five- and six-floor properties in mainstream residential districts, such as Ilissia, 5km east of the centre, cost around €5,000 per sq metre, rising to €8,000 per sq metre in Kolonaki, a fashionable neighbourhood beneath Lykavettos, where about a third of upper-floor apartments have at least a partial view of an Acropolis temple.

In up-and-coming former industrial areas, such as

Kerameikos and Gazi, also west of the centre, top-floor spaces once used for storage cost about €4,000 per sq metre and come with a postmodern view of the classical temples above a foreground of television aerials and rusting metal ventilators. At ground level, former workshops are meanwhile being taken over by restaurants, bars and theatre companies.

Nicholas Pizaris, an American lawyer of Greek descent, converted the top two floors of a commercial block in Psyrri, a central neighbourhood that has become a nightlife hub, into a second home. His view of the Parthenon's north side is all the more dramatic for being surrounded by modern buildings. "It's a powerful presence. Having dinner on the terrace under a full moon is quite an experience," he says. Further west in a gritty commercial district around Constantinopoleos street, top-floor spaces with an Acropolis view are available for about €2,500 per sq metre. "You'd have to pay the same again to make this kind of property liveable but it would certainly be worthwhile," Triphyllis says. "My experience has been that you don't get tired of looking at the Parthenon."

Kerin Hope is the FT's Athens correspondent

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Details

K. Samaropoulou & Associates, tel: +30 2103616400

www.samaropoulou.gr

ISV and Associates, tel: +30 2104839660 www.isv.gr